What is Sustainable City Project?

Sustainable City Project—or SCP—is what I call a think tank, make tank, say tank, and do tank. Our goal is to produce relevant research, design work, publications, and real projects that will shape, define, and influence the next generation of cities. We’re a unique initiative because we are at root interdisciplinary, supported jointly by the University of Arizona’s College of Architecture, Planning, and Landscape Architecture (CAPLA), the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences (SBS), and the Institute of the Environment (IE). In short—we combine design, social science, and science expertise in our projects.

Why is the Sustainable City Project important now?

The world is more and more an interdisciplinary, collaborative environment, but academic institutions—particularly design studios—tend to support the autonomous expert. SCP is a model for the next generation of professionals and the next generation of cities. A well-designed city, particularly in this era of limited resources, has to be holistically considered. People from different agencies and of different disciplines have to work together to create efficient, productive, multifunctional and beautiful design solutions that solve more than one single problem at a time. In other words, we’re not doing our best if all we do is pave roads and don’t simultaneously consider bikes, pedestrians, water harvesting, shade, alternative energy, landscape, and public space—particularly in the hot, arid southwest. Student housing is another example. This single demographic model may be financially attractive right now, but its contribution to downtown diversity and its ability to be flexible and adaptable is limited in the long run, and buildings and cities should be very long run investments.

What are some of the projects you’re working on?

We’ve just wrapped up the first Interdisciplinary Urban Design Studio where architecture, landscape architecture, and planning students worked together to create design ideas for sites around 4th, 6th, and Stone Avenues where they pass under the railroad. These northeastern entryways into downtown are on the verge of significant reconsideration with the construction of the Downtown Links, planning for the streetcar, possible improvements at the Ronstadt Transit Center, and an eclectic Warehouse Arts District. Each of these could be a year-long studio project. Some of the best ideas include new programmatic concepts like “intelligent arts” housing and co-work
spaces; an industrial arts campus for the welders, woodworkers, and recycled material artists already in the neighborhood; and dynamic green infrastructure including a cool idea called the Ecotree. I hope to further develop some of these proposals with future students and other experts.

We’ll be working on this same area of the city when a team I’ve assembled heads to Washington DC in June. We are one of eight teams selected by the American Architecture Foundations’ Sustainable Cities Design Academy to travel to DC and participate in a workshop with nationally-recognized urban sustainability experts. This is quite an honor, and we hope to bring back additional innovative ideas to share with the city.

My partners at the Institute of the Environment and TEP are working on another project with SCP that includes a green walk, model block, and eco square. The first is a mobile web application that will highlight the green amenities along the streetcar line. This leads to a model block that combines multiple social and environmental initiatives and really transforms the street into an ecologically-friendly public space. The block leads to the eco square, a public space that incorporates the best practices in sustainable building and demonstrates the cutting edge research and implementation in alternative energy and arid environment science already going on at the University and in private industry here in Tucson.

What are the most important steps leaders in Tucson and the immediate region can make to encourage growth in the most sustainable way?

As urban populations grow and as residents of all ages and demographics seek more convenient, walkable cities, our goal must be to make Tucson competitive as a place young professionals, creative class, entrepreneurs, and engaged people of all ages want to stay or relocate. As I heard at an urban design conference in Phoenix a few weeks ago— “You can’t be a suburb of nothing.” In other words, it takes a vibrant and strong urban core to support a successful city, particularly one as geographically diffuse as ours. We have to recognize and leverage the value of our downtown urban sites and not allow them to be allocated to monofunctional programming driven only by a financial bottom line. These are key sites in supporting civic and cultural richness and their significance should be reflected in the quality of their architecture and their commitment to sustainability. We also need high quality housing for the wide range of people we want living in and near our urban core.

Tucson has an opportunity to be a real leader in the design of sustainable cities, both because our environment is so extreme and because our downtown seems on the verge of a real eco renaissance should we choose to consciously veer in that direction.

There are also terms here that seem misunderstood, perhaps for good reason. The concept of “density,” for example, is not about building height, but about convenience and accessibility. If we concentrate resources, not only do we get more bang for the buck (simply less linear feet of every utility, for one), we also have stronger communities (which can reduce crime as a side benefit), less wasted commuting time, and, studies have shown, generally better health. Walkability is key to the success of the 21st century city, and, in Tucson, shade as well as adjacency is key to walkability.

All of these are things we need to invest in, and they often demand creative models of public/private/civic partnership to fund.
What are the goals for Sustainable City Project’s future?
This first 8 months have been spent simply trying to figure out what Tucson is, how it works, and who to meet. That process is just beginning. We are growing our list of faculty and student affiliates, government and community partners, and looking for neighborhoods, non-profits, and businesses that want to work with us. We have a growing social media presence (www.sustainablecityproject.com) where we keep a running list of news, projects, and resources relevant to sustainable cities and Tucson in particular. Our website, once launched, will grow that resource and include our network of peer urban think tanks and a trove of data and design work.

This summer we will work more explicitly with groups engaged in the equity leg of sustainability— food justice, poverty, housing. The overriding mission is to create a more sustainable city, which means considering economy, equity, and the environment, and in our case, all through the lens of design.

Dr. Linda C. Samuels is the new Director for the Sustainable City Project, a multi-disciplinary research, teaching, and outreach initiative of the University of Arizona. Samuels recently received her doctorate in Urban Planning from the University of California, Los Angeles. Prior to her current appointment, Samuels was a Senior Research Associate at cityLAB, an urban think tank in UCLA’s Department of Architecture and Urban Design, and an adjunct lecturer at the University of Southern California, Woodbury University, and Otis College of Art and Design. She can be reached at lcsamuels@email.arizona.edu.